

Australian Indigenous performing arts and cultural policy

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Abstract
This paper examines how Australian Indigenous cultural policies have contributed to the development of Aboriginal theatre since the early 1990s. In many respects, the flourishing of Indigenous performing arts exemplify the priorities of national cultural policy more broadly. These priorities include the assertion of national identity in a globalised world – a goal that is amply realised in the publicly funded Indigenous performing arts. The paper examines how government policies have assisted the growth of Indigenous theatre companies and the professional development of their artists. It draws on interviews with Indigenous theatre artists to identify their changing professional needs, and argues that cultural policies need to develop pluralist strategies which encourage a diversity of practices for the future development of the sector.

Introduction

I think all my work has been absolutely defined by the search for an articulation of an Indigenous voice.
The Indigenous performing arts sector received unprecedented political and financial support from government in the early 1990s. Indigenous arts were and still are regarded as an important means of expressing what is culturally unique about Australia, to assist in advancing the political goal of reconciliation between white and Indigenous Australians, and to address a range of social, economic and cultural problems Indigenous Australians experience. Since the early 1990s, there has been little review of how the Indigenous performing arts companies and their artists have fared with these substantial expectations of their work. The recent change of Federal government and the Prime Minister’s official apology to Indigenous Australians for past abuses suggest that a review of a range of Indigenous policies and their impact is timely. This paper seeks to examine how Indigenous theatre artists have experienced the growing political interest in their work over the past fifteen years, and the effect of cultural policies on their work.

Several of the themes of this paper were articulated by one of our interviewees, Wesley Enoch. Enoch is an acclaimed Australian theatre director and writer and a Nunnuccul Nuugi man from Stradbroke Island in Queensland. He commented:

I was born in 1969, and I rode a wave of policy change…from health and housing and education all the way through, so that by the time I was ready to go to university, policies were in place to allow me and my sister to go even though there was no way we could have afforded to go otherwise. … And I guess now what I’m seeing is that there’s a whole generation of Indigenous artists who are empowered and now we want policy to respond to us rather than being the beneficiaries of policy.

Enoch’s account is significant for a number of reasons. First, the anecdote identifies the importance of political developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s across many areas of Indigenous policy-making including health, housing and education. Second, it identifies a variety of ways in which policies relating to Indigenous people were instrumental in creating opportunities for him and other Indigenous arts practitioners to develop as artists in that period. Finally, the anecdote suggests that the current era is one in which there are some Indigenous artists who, partly as a result of
policies designed to empower them, have become active contributors to the policy-making process.

During the course of this research we conducted twelve interviews: five participants hold positions within arts and/or Indigenous policy agencies; five participants are currently involved (either as Artistic Directors or General Managers) in managing Indigenous performing arts organisations; and two are independent artists (performers/ writers/directors). Most of the Indigenous practitioners we spoke to had taken on, during the course of their professional lives, a range of different roles from performing or directing as freelance artists, to managing Indigenous arts companies, and then returning to freelance work. All the Indigenous artists we interviewed are experienced practitioners with a significant body of work to their credit and this focused the research on to issues for mid career artists. Interviewees were selected on the advice of a handful of prominent Indigenous artists. These artists were asked to recommend the policy-makers and other artists they believed to be significant in shaping the relationship between policy and performing arts practice. In this way, we ensured that the study was informed by people whose influence on cultural policy was significant, even if their official positions did not suggest so. The interviewees’ anecdotes about their experiences as Indigenous performing artists have shaped our analysis of the developing relationships between Indigenous cultural policies and the performing arts practices of the past fifteen years.

Discussing the relationship between politics and culture, Dubois emphasises the importance of thinking in terms of ‘relations between political and cultural actors’ (2006 p.2) These actors, he explains ’sometimes cooperate, sometimes struggle, within specific historical contexts’. This paper seeks to identify the political and cultural actors who have, between them, shaped the ‘field’ of Indigenous cultural policy and performing arts. This paper shares with Dubois an interest in exploring the fluid and reflexive nature of the relations between politics and culture. Indigenous cultural policy is a case in point: where the key cultural and political actors have sometimes cooperated and sometimes competed within the specific field of historical and political relations circumscribed by the reconciliation and land rights movement.
The arts policies of the Australian Labor Party Government elected in November 2007 are currently being formulated. The arts minister Peter Garret has suggested that support for Indigenous arts will be a priority, although what form that support will take is yet unclear. Over the past fifteen years, Federal Government backing for Indigenous theatre has included significant support for three state-based performing arts companies. We look at the signal achievements of those three companies and establish why their work, emerging when it did, was an important contribution to the political struggle of Indigenous people in telling their stories. In undertaking this research we discovered that there is a diversity of views within the professional Indigenous performing arts community as to the role of Indigenous theatre and appropriate cultural policy relating to it. This paper focuses on the nature of this diversity and its significance for policy making.

That such a diversity of opinion exists is no surprise given that Indigenous communities are geographically and culturally diverse. Australian Indigenous communities do not share a common language unlike, for example, Indigenous New Zealanders, and there are many separately identifiable cultural traditions within Australia. We are not suggesting that the diversity of views we have uncovered is new, but the struggle over ideas is taking place at a time when Federal cultural policies are in the process of review. This means that this is an important time to assess issues stemming from this diversity. Should the three Indigenous theatre companies which were established in the early 1990s continue to be publicly funded? If they are, what does this mean for emerging artists and organisations? Is there a role, for example, for a national Indigenous theatre company – a proposal which is currently floated by a group of performing artists who are not aligned to the existing companies?

This paper discusses, first, the development of government policies and Indigenous arts practices that led to a period of unusually pro-active policy development in the early 1990s. Second, it examines the emergence and growth of Indigenous theatre companies from that period, and third, it identifies current trends and tensions in the relationship between Indigenous performing arts and the policies that relate to them. Our paper is a call for current policy deliberations to acknowledge the complexity of the Indigenous performing arts sector and the diversity of views, needs and priorities of the
participants. In February 2008, the current Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered an official apology to the Indigenous peoples of Australia – an apology for past wrongs and historical injustices. The artists we spoke to this year are emboldened by the apology which most thought they would never hear in their lifetimes. This has affected their work, but also their expectations for the future of Indigenous theatre.

Indigenous cultural policy
The decade of the 1990s was significant both to the development of Indigenous public policies generally, and to Indigenous cultural policies specifically. The organisations we examine in this paper were the beneficiaries of policies developed in the early 1990s and, through these organisations, so too were the artists. Many policies and initiatives established in the 1990s were designed to redress prior oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The decade was punctuated by significant events in Indigenous politics. Early in the decade came the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (1990) and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1991); the Royal Commission’s report into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) and the High Court’s Mabo judgment (1992). In 1995 the Bringing them home report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (1995) was released, which recommended an official national apology to the victims of the stolen generations. At the close of the decade, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation presented its Reconciliation report to Parliament (2000) and 250,000 people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in the ‘Reconciliation walk’.

The policies dealing with Indigenous issues and investigations into the needs of Indigenous people gave rise to cultural policy developments. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s Bringing them home report and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) both recommended that, since cultural participation was significant to the social and economic well-being of Indigenous communities, the arts and culture were important public investments.

These recommendations contributed to the development of a range of public initiatives in funding Indigenous arts, as did statistical data that indicated that the Indigenous arts were significant to Australia’s identity and economy. From 1980 to
1991 the number of Aboriginal arts organisations grew faster than the number of all cultural organisations, from 2 per cent of cultural organizations in 1980 to 4.1 per cent of cultural organizations in 1991 (Australia Council 2000: 8). It would have been difficult to ignore the economic significance of Indigenous visual arts, particularly, to tourism. In 1990, an Australia Council survey established that 49 per cent of visitors to Australia were interested in Aboriginal arts and culture (quoted in Fourmile 1994: 81). Henrietta Fourmile noted in 1994 that:

Beside the spectacular successes of our Aboriginal visual artists, in the field of literature people such as Kevin Gilbert, Oodgeroo Nunuccal, Jack Davis, Mudooroo Narogin, Robert Bropho and Sally Morgan are becoming household names. The musical talents of Yothu Yindi, Jimmy Chi and Kuckes, the Warumpi Band, Archie Roach, No Fixed Address, and Maroochy Baramba are now widely appreciated. Ernie Dingo, Lydia Miller, David Gulpillil, Justine Saunders and Bob Maza have regularly featured on stage and in film and television productions (Fourmile 1994: 81).

In 1994, the Keating Government published Australia’s first cultural policy statement, Creative Nation. This statement made it clear that Indigenous arts complemented what has since become known as Keating’s ‘big picture’ for Australia’s future, in that they appeared to hold both cultural and economic benefits for Australia in a globalising international economy. Creative Nation declared that ‘recognition of the importance of indigenous arts and cultural traditions to the whole of Australia’ was ‘a significant step in the reconciliation process’ and that ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts are assuming increasing significance for Australia, in tourism and the projection of Australian culture overseas’ (DCA 1994: 21). Throughout the eleven years of the Howard Government, Commonwealth cultural policy maintained the simultaneous emphases on Indigenous arts as an important form of cultural capital for Indigenous communities and the nation, and as a source of income for Indigenous artists and communities.

From the early 1990s onwards, state governments, too, emphasised the importance of enhancing Indigenous cultural practices to economic and social well-being. In 2004, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) established the ‘Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage’ framework, based on the notion of ‘shared responsibility’
between the levels of government and the community. The Cultural Ministers Council’s 2006 *A framework for national cooperation in the arts and culture* made Indigenous arts and culture one of its four priority areas for national cooperation over the following decade. It continued the view that Indigenous arts have the ‘potential to strengthen both Indigenous identity and Australia’s broader identity in the world’ (CMC 2006: 4). It aimed to build ‘sustainable arts businesses’ and to foster the social benefits of Indigenous cultural identity for Indigenous people; and at the same time it aimed to encourage and build awareness of the contribution that Indigenous arts make to national identity.

The expansion of policies directly targeting the development of Indigenous cultural activities in the early 1990s corresponded with and assisted the rise of Indigenous theatre companies. Three Indigenous theatre companies came into existence: Ilbijerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative in Victoria, Kooemba Jdarra in Queensland and Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre in Western Australia. Ilbijerri was formed in 1990 with a mandate to create new theatre work dealing with issues affecting Indigenous communities (Casey 219). It sees itself, as a community-based organisation, whose goal is to ‘transform our community through a theatre experience. The motivation is inclusion, empowerment, the ability to tell our stories on our terms, share our history, examine our ideas, keep culture evolving’ (Kruger 2007). One of the most significant productions to emerge from Ilbijerri was *Stolen* (1996). Written by Jane Harrison, the play was developed in response to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. The Inquiry found evidence of countless examples of the traumatic separation of Aboriginal children from their families and Harrison drew on these accounts to inform her play. *Stolen*, a co-production between Ilbijerri and Melbourne’s Playbox Theatre and directed by Wesley Enoch, was first performed in 1998 and subsequently toured Australia and then internationally to great acclaim. In 2008, Ilbijerri was sponsored by the Australia Council, the Federal Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, the state government’s department of arts (Arts Victoria), and department of health (VicHealth), Arts for Health and the City of Melbourne.
Kooemba Jdarra was established in Brisbane in 1993, the International Year of Indigenous Peoples, with a brief to develop youth and community-based projects (Eltham 2004) Indigenous artists such as Wesley Enoch, Lafe Charlton and Deborah Mailman were instrumental in arguing for the value of an Indigenous theatre company in Brisbane to produce ‘high quality performances and theatre that would tell our own stories’ (Eltham 2004). One of the key works to emerge was *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996) a one-woman show co-written by Enoch and Mailman. Delivered directly to the audience, the play merges individual stories of grief and loss with public grieving for outrages against Aboriginal people since colonisation. It premiered in 1995 and then toured nationally and internationally. In 2008 the future of Kooemba Jdarra is unclear as the Australia Council has withdrawn federal funding from the organisation. It receives funding from the Federal department (EWHA) and continues to operate with project grants from Arts Queensland.

Yirra Yaakin, based in Perth, had a similar genesis to Kooemba Jdarra in the sense that it was an initiative of Indigenous artists and it was funded as a community-based organisation. Starting in 1993 with a focus on youth theatre, by 1997 it had broadened its activities to producing work for the wider community (Casey 226). However, the target audience for the work of the company is the Noongar people in south west Western Australia. David Milroy was Artistic Director of the company from the late 1990s and he wrote and directed one the company’s most celebrated plays, *Windmill Baby* (2003) – a one-woman show based on oral histories from the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia. The play has toured nationally and internationally to the UK, Canada and France. In 2008, Yirra Yaakin received funding from the WA Department of the Arts, the WA government, Lottery West, the WA Department of Health, the federal department (EWHA) and the Australia Council.

All three companies are concerned with the empowerment (through the affirmation of on-going traditional and contemporary cultures) and self determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through the production of Aboriginal theatre. A commitment to the control of decision-making is a recurring theme in the mission statements of these Indigenous theatre companies (Casey 226).
These three companies were the beneficiaries of public funding under Commonwealth and state governments since their inception. The companies have produced an important body of work since the early 1990s - work which has reflected (and been shaped by) the various issues emerging in Indigenous politics – stolen generations, reconciliation and land rights. Consistent with the *Bringing them home* report’s emphasis on the role of culture in repairing the social fabric of Indigenous communities, the work of the three companies has been largely defined by the interests of the communities in which they were based, and it has been a priority for these companies to perform for audiences drawn from their own communities. Kylie Belling, former Artistic Director of Ilbijerri explains: ‘it was always about taking the show to our mob first and foremost. That was the whole purpose of setting up Ilbijerri in the first place’ (p. 8).

Another priority of the companies was to nurture Indigenous writers. Belling argues that providing opportunities for Aboriginal writers to have their work developed was a critical activity because: ‘they are our voice; they are the ones who tell the rest of the world what we as a people are concerned about, who we are’. Related to this issue was the need to provide roles for Indigenous performers: many of the artistic directors and artists we spoke to (such as Belling, Wesley Enoch, Rachael Maza Long and Rhoda Roberts) began their professional lives as actors. Part of the project of the Indigenous theatre companies was to make it possible for Aboriginal performers to act in roles written by Indigenous writers. These priorities mark out the function of the companies as principally focused on empowerment, the affirmation of cultural practices, and self-determination.

In 2008, the policy regimes which have seen funding and support for these companies are being reconsidered. In general terms, arts and cultural policies are under review and a number of the people we spoke to implied that the rationale in continuing to fund those companies is under question. In this moment of ambiguity, a range of tensions within the sector is emerging.

**Tensions in cultural policies and Indigenous theatre**

*Professional development versus social policy goals*
At the heart of the interviews we conducted was the question of how decisions about
the value of Indigenous theatre should be made. A long-held argument of the
companies has been that the value of Indigenous theatre lies in how successfully it
meets the needs of Indigenous communities (Casey 2004: 209). Kylie Belling, former
Artistic Director of Ilbijerri, expressed Ilbijerri’s commitment to advancing the well-
being of the community it represents:

You want Indigenous money [public or philanthropic funding tagged for
Indigenous projects], you have to be doing something that is of benefit to your
community and to your people … and that’s fine because that’s what we want to
do anyway. So it was about convincing [funding organisations] that the projects
we wanted to do were going to impact as broadly as possible throughout our
mob.

In 2005 to 2007, for example, Ilbijerri produced *Chopped Liver*: a comedy that toured
nationally to educate Indigenous communities about Hepatitis C. *Chopped Liver* was
produced with the financial assistance of the Victorian Department of Heath and the
Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. Similarly, Denise
Andrews, Interim Chief Executive Officer of the Queensland-based Aboriginal Centre
for Performing Arts, recognised that her organisation’s public funding was chiefly
based on its role in improving employment for Indigenous performing artists.

Others suggest that the requirement that the performing arts companies meet a wide
range of needs from the Indigenous communities – such as providing employment, and
education about health and social issues – is now so central to the criteria by which
public funding is allocated that it can act as an impediment to the professional artistic
development of the companies and their artists. Wesley Enoch described this:

‘Indigenous artists have been asked for decades to work at the pace of their
slowest to bring everyone along with them and to use their skills, in this case to
use theatre skills to empower others and it’s all been a process of give, give,
give to everyone so that everyone can come with you. …[It’s] the equivalent of
asking Cathy Freeman to run slowly so that everyone can keep up with her. In
fact, if you do your best and you achieve great results then suddenly everyone
will aspire to run a little faster or to run at least or whatever, so my thing is that
you don’t ask Cathy Freeman to run slowly nor should you ask Indigenous
artists to go at the pace of the slowest or not to be the best they can’.
This was echoed by Denise Andrews who emphasised the pressure that funding expectations placed on an organisation: ‘One single organisation’s expected to be able to deal with every aspect from the incoming, outgoing side, lateral up bottom views, so that 360 corporate view has come into community organisations in the theatre and that’s in the funding, that’s the funding regimes that we’re in now … you have to get training, you have to get employment, you have to get all those things around you right to deal with everything.’

This constraint or burden upon professional Indigenous artists is increasingly recognised by policy makers. Ian Hamm, Deputy Director of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, noted that ‘one of the premises that we have got wrong is that everything Aboriginal has to be inclusive of everything and everyone … they’re not community development and engagement workers, they’re artists and I think that that’s a problem’.

In a sense, the distinction between the goal of advancing the social and cultural well-being of Indigenous communities and the goal of advancing the professionalism of Indigenous theatre mirrors the themes of the Indigenous cultural policies that developed in the 1990s. While the Bringing them home report advocated greater public investment in Indigenous cultural initiatives in order to build the social and cultural strength of Indigenous communities, the Royal Commission’s Report into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and subsequent policy approaches emphasised the development of professionalism Indigenous cultural activities, which it saw as the means to economic improvement of Indigenous communities. Our research indicates that this set of tensions continues to define the sector and that Indigenous artists are engaged in a struggle over different understandings and perceptions of the value and purpose of Indigenous theatre.

Need for training

All the professional acting training institutions in Australia produced notable Aboriginal performers throughout the 1990s. As Enoch points out above, the training of Aboriginal theatre-makers can also be seen as a product of the tertiary education policy objectives of universities and professional training institutions over the past twenty years to encourage enrolments by Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander students. Further, the three Indigenous theatre companies helped to produce and develop the
skills of a generation of Indigenous writers (such as John Harding, Richard Frankland, Jane Harrison, Wesley Enoch, Andrea James and David Milroy).

However, the interviews conducted for this study revealed a growing concern about the lack of adequately trained Indigenous personnel in a range of creative, management and technical roles. Radbourne, Campbell and Ding have noted that ‘Indigenous performing arts companies struggle to overcome a lack of marketing and business skills’ (Radbourne 2006, p. 238). We found that respondents highlighted the urgent need to train Indigenous directors, designers and arts managers, and to retain students in training institutions where they often feel estranged.

Another key issue for the respondents is the need for mid-career support for Indigenous performing artists through mentoring, commissioning and masterclasses. Rhoda Roberts, Artistic Director of the Dreaming Festival, comments: ‘I look at a number of artists who hit their mid-life, mid career. In other art forms around the world and in Australia, they are celebrated because they are the masters. What happens to ours? They disappear, and the next bright young thing comes along and bit of money is injected’. A related issue is the weight of expectation on successful Indigenous artists who often experience a tremendous pressure to keep producing the goods: ‘what happens is that … somebody’s written a play, they’re Indigenous, you grab it, the expectations of them grow beyond their capacity to develop alongside that success, they either burn out or at some point people say “Oh, [that’s] not very good”. It’s a lot of expectation on one person’.

These issues around training and professional development indicate that the Indigenous performing arts sector needs to develop strategies for training and retaining creative and technical personnel. Arguably, support for mid-career artists is a concern across the performing arts generally, but the issue is exacerbated here where retention of skilled professionals is a key component of the on-going vitality of the sector.

**Independence or reliance on public funding**

One of key issues for all the interviewees focused on the relationship between the Indigenous performing arts sector and the present system of funding. For all respondents the issue of securing sufficient funds to continue to work was central. But
there was difference of opinion about how this might be managed. Maza Long, the current Artistic Director of Ilbijerri, expressed concern about the possibility, floated by the Australia Council’s ATSIA board, that funding for Indigenous theatre companies would be limited by a sunset clause. After a prescribed number of years the companies would be required to seek financial support from ticket sales and non-government sources. Maza Long felt that this would be detrimental to the work of the company.

On the other hand, others argued that independence from government ‘handouts’ is an important next step for Indigenous artists. Rhoda Roberts argued that the expectation of on-going government funding needs to be addressed: ‘we are actually sitting down with a couple of Aboriginal groups that have been funded by the Commonwealth ... one group in particular ... has been funded for 12 years, and they think it is their right to get this money … Well don’t you think 12 years is a long time, you need to share it with another group? … Let’s try and become semi-independent. I think with some companies...there will always be a level of … dependency on government income, but reduce it and find other clever ways of increasing [revenue].’ Enoch noted that funding for specific companies limited opportunities for other companies practising the same art form. He described a way of thinking in public funding that ‘Once you have an Indigenous theatre company, you don’t need a second. “Got it, we don’t need a second one”, even though there’s such a diverse practice. … And what you heap onto that one organisation is the responsibility to represent a whole community, a whole state, instead of saying “you are one voice amongst many”.

Ian Hamm from Aboriginal Affairs Victoria sees the shift away from dependency on government support as an inevitable outcome of the general direction of government policies both within and outside the arts. Hamm notes: ‘like all arts communities the Aboriginal one will struggle a bit and I think … that’s not a bad thing. It teaches people independence, it breaks the relationship – the nexus – with government, which is not a bad thing and really self-determination is a catch phrase that’s used a lot but it’s [about] hard work. Self-determination: what does it actually mean? It means standing on your own two feet and taking responsibility for your own actions and… not having someone to pick up the pieces.’
For Roberts, a key issue is how to train young and emerging Indigenous artists how to access any funding at all. Roberts noted that many Indigenous arts organisations are often advised to look elsewhere for funding, because applications for public funding are considered to have too many conditions and to be unnecessarily difficult. Likewise, Andrews commented that the graduates from the Aboriginal Performing Arts Centre need skills in understanding the language of policy and filling out forms: ‘Our students, particularly when they’re starting off, don’t have the networks necessarily to draw other funding to different projects, so they’ve got to be able to craft the language of the policy and the grant … it’s all that nuts and bolts of the application itself that brings them undone’. Roberts’ view is, arguably, confirmed by the evidence of diminishing numbers of Indigenous projects submitted to the Theatre Board of the Australia Council over the past five years.

**Who is the audience?**

Jennifer Craik highlighted the need for Indigenous companies ‘to increase participation in non-indigenous festivals and events’ and to reach a wider mainstream Australian audience (Craik 2007: 43) and this was very much a theme amongst the artists interviewed. When asked about the motivations for producing their work, all respondents echoed Enoch’s belief, quoted above, that the articulation of an Indigenous voice was their highest *raison d’être*. Roberts explained: ‘As a Bundjalung woman I have a moral obligation, I have no choice. I have the opportunity, the oratory skills … the platforms, whether it be theatre, television, radio, festivals … to show that my people are human beings … So for me it is that obligation to my community to challenge the stereotypes – to challenge those situations with faith, and to also provide fun and positive energy and all the rest of it.’

While this view was shared by all interviewees, there was some difference of opinion on the question of who forms the primary audience for the companies’ work. For Belling, the first and most important audience is the Aboriginal community in which and for which Ilbijerri performs. She sees this as a political act which is ‘about teaching our young ones our history, because they don’t learn any other way’. For other artists, the purpose of the work was to address all audiences. Andrews explains that Indigenous performing artists understand the specific pleasure of performing for your own ‘mob’: ‘Because … they know the subtleties of the humour, and it’s just a different feeling…
Indigenous performers have told me that performing for your own mob is fabulous, it just puts you on a high. But from a career base, you’ve got to look wider’. Many of the companies organise community nights with cheaper tickets to encourage attendance from within Indigenous communities.

Artists also expressed a sensitivity to the effect of the audience on their work. In their study of audience potential for Kooemba Jdarra’s performances, Radbourne, Campbell and Ding noted the ‘inherently conservative attitude of mainstream theatre audiences who do not want to risk leaving their comfort zones’ (2006: 244). The authors thus recommended that Kooemba Jdarra should ‘aim to reduce consumer risk’ in order to attract a broad audience (2006: 245). Consistent with their observation about non-Indigenous audiences, Maza Long described a resistance by audiences to Indigenous performances that are considered ‘non-traditional’. She argued that producing plays with Indigenous audiences in mind often allowed Indigenous artists to be more adventurous as Indigenous audiences are less likely to have restrictive preconceived ideas about the appropriate subject matter and techniques of Indigenous theatre.

However, a number of the artists we spoke to argued that the future of the Indigenous performing arts sector requires new thinking about the audience for the work. Enoch emphasised the importance of trying to embrace the broadest possible audience, and described a policy of the Sydney Theatre Company in relation to the play The Cherry Pickers (written by Aboriginal playwright Kevin Gilbert), which Enoch directed in 2000. The policy was to ensure that at least 25 per cent of the audience was Indigenous, to improve the quality of the experience for the entire audience: ‘in this case 25 per cent of the house being Aboriginal meant that [non-Indigenous audiences] could also see the dynamic of the work with Indigenous audiences and try to place it within a cultural reality’.

The research undertaken here, then, highlighted a number of key issues for contemporary Indigenous performing artists and organisations. The need for training and the professional development of creative personnel remains a vital concern for the sector. The issue of balancing the broader goals of social welfare with the aesthetic goals of theatre making – along with the questions of who the theatre work is for (who is the audience), and how it should be funded – are key problems for the sector and its
practitioners. The prevalence of such concerns amongst Indigenous performing artists suggests that this is a time when perceptions about the value and purposes of the Indigenous performing arts are fracturing and evolving.

An illustration of this debate within the Indigenous performing arts sector is the current proposal, floated by a small group of freelance Indigenous performing artists, for a National Indigenous Theatre Company. The group has begun lobbying state and federal governments to consider the possibility of providing seed funding for the company. The proposal has been hotly debated within Indigenous communities around the country with a range of views expressed. It is unclear at this stage whether the government funding agencies will support it. However the existence of the proposal as a serious contender for consideration by government demonstrates the diversity of views within the Indigenous performing arts over the range of issues we have raised in this paper.

The proposal comes from Indigenous artists who are at mid-career and are seeking opportunities for their work to be seen on the main stage. The proposal discusses the need for Indigenous stories to reach wide audiences – not just ‘our mob’, but national and international audiences. The proposal seeks a funding mix of both government and non-government sources with an emphasis on increasing audiences. The proposal, then, encapsulates some key ideas about where the sector is heading: it represents a move away from thinking about Indigenous performing arts in terms of the needs of emerging artists, and focuses instead on the professional development and artistic goals of artists at mid-career. It represents a move away from thinking about Indigenous performing arts in terms of community and social justice goals, and focuses instead on aesthetic and political–professional outcomes. This proposal for a National Indigenous Theatre Company is not a fait accompli and does not necessarily have the support of all stakeholders. But in this post-sorry political environment, it represents a new wave of thinking about the future of the Indigenous performing arts in Australia.

Conclusion
Since the early 1990s, successive Australian Commonwealth and state governments have funded Indigenous arts to express the identity of Australia’s Indigenous peoples. The work that was produced over the past fourteen years articulated responses to developments within the broader political landscape. As Jennifer Craik argues, ‘Although subsumed within a suite of “welfare” and redistribution policies, the sector
has become entwined with issues of self-determination, political activism, rejection of mainstream governance, pan-indigeneity … professionalisation and commercial potential’ (Craik 2007: 44). The findings of this paper confirm Craik’s assertion that Indigenous performing artists work within the context of a wide variety of political expectations.

From the start of 2008, the new Rudd government has delivered an apology on behalf of all the people of Australia to its Indigenous peoples. This, together with the apparent interest in re-thinking arts policy generally which has been mooted by the current Arts Minister Peter Garrett, makes this an interesting moment to look at the future of the Indigenous performing arts. The authors of this paper recommend that future reviews of Indigenous cultural policies relating to the performing arts consider the issues that interviewees contributed to the formation of this paper: the competing aims of developing professionalism and achieving Indigenous social goals; the need for substantial training opportunities; the tension between a desire for financial independence and opportunities for public funding; and between performances aimed at Indigenous audiences and broader audiences.

Indigenous cultural policy needs to develop pluralist strategies which encourage a diversity of practices for the future development of the sector. The signal achievement for Indigenous theatre of the past fourteen years of Indigenous cultural policy has been the development of three professional performing arts companies, along with trained and experienced Indigenous performing arts practitioners like Wesley Enoch, Kylie Belling and Rachael Maza Long. These artists, and many others like them, are now at mid-career and have produced a substantial body of work. This is no small feat. The challenge then for future policy deliberation is to engage with these important ‘cultural actors’ to ensure the provision of multiple and diverse opportunities for their on-going professional development and for their creativity to develop and flourish.

List of Interviewees*

Denise Andrews, Interim CEO and Chair of Board of the Centre for Aboriginal Performing Arts, Queensland.
John Bayliss, Director Theatre Board, Australia Council.

Kylie Belling, performer, former Artistic Director Ilbijerri Theatre, Victoria.

Vera Ding, Director Theatre, Writing and New Media, Arts Queensland, former General Manager of Kooemba Jdarra Theatre, Queensland.

Wesley Enoch, independent theatre director and writer, former Artistic Director Ilbijerri Theatre, Victoria & former Artistic Director Kooemba Jdarra Theatre, Queensland.

Ian Hamm, Deputy Director Aboriginal Affairs Victoria.

Jon Harvey, General Manager Ilbijerri Theatre, Victoria.

Rachael Maza Long, performer and Artistic Director Ilbijerri Theatre, Victoria.

Kerry McIlveney, Senior Project Officer, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board, Australia Council.

Lydia Miller, Director Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board, Australia Council.

Stephen Page, Artistic Director Bangarra Dance Theatre, NSW.

Rhoda Roberts, performer and Artistic Director of the Dreaming Festival, Queensland.

Amy Rodgers-Clarke, Arts Development Officer, Arts Queensland.

* All interviews conducted March to April 2008.

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